

Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Lent Year B (2009)

The third of the cardinal virtues is fortitude. This is a bit like courage or bravery, but like all the virtues it is more than an occasional characteristic, the ability to produce brave behaviour from time to time: fortitude is a constant and consistent feature of a person's character that means they are firm and unflinching in doing the right thing, even if doing the right thing will involve some cost to themselves. Fortitude stays firm and determined in the face of difficulties and opposition, and accepts that living well will involve some element of self-sacrifice. It does not look for suffering or injury, but it accepts that in some circumstances suffering, whether that may be physical pain, or prejudicial treatment, or the loss of job or home, or financial hardship, may be inevitable if one is to be loyal to the truth. Fortitude accepts that although it might be possible to compromise one's principles in order to avoid suffering, the right thing to do may be to stay true to what you believe, and even though you may be injured or even, in extreme cases, killed, yet at a deeper level you remain intact, whereas the person who compromised to save themselves finds that in doing so they have preserved their safety but sacrificed their integrity. It calls to mind the incident where Peter has just rebuked Jesus for saying that he will be rejected and killed. Jesus realizes that Peter has not realized quite how severe the cost of staying true to the Father will be, so he says to him *"For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it. What profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?"* (Mk 8.35-6) Jesus was well aware that sometimes, where one is faced with the choice between compromising with evil but saving one's life on the one hand, and staying firm in the face of evil, but dying on the other, the choice is effectively between the living death of the one who knows he has betrayed himself, and the eternal life of the one who has stayed true.

This is a difficult lesson to learn, and it is not one that we find easy to listen to in our relatively safe and secure liberal democracy. Talk of dying for one's principles seems almost absurd. But if you try to question the values of our contemporary society for a moment, you will see that the need for fortitude is as great as ever. Try asking a doctor who stands firm against abortion, or a teacher who believes that education means developing a moral sense rather than imparting information, or the employee who declines to join in some charity fundraising exercise because of moral concerns about the money's destination, or someone who declines to accept their friends pleasure-seeking lifestyle, and you will find that discrimination, ridicule and rejection, all of which can be very costly and very painful, are very much a part of our own society. ***[Brief excursus onto the press coverage of the Pope in Africa. Notes on this section are included below]*** Fortitude, the idea of remaining true to one's principles in spite of the cost, is something that our present age finds hard to understand. This is because fortitude involves saying that I will place my life at the service of something greater, more important than me; but if my life, my comfort, my pleasure are the most important things for me, if I know nothing greater than them, then I am incapable of fortitude, there is nothing I think important enough to sacrifice my comfort for.

Fortitude means being prepared to suffer some injury for the sake of preserving what is good. Mere bravery or risk-taking alone is not enough, the motive for it must be the preservation of the good. This means that fortitude depends on the virtues we have already considered. Fortitude requires you to be prudent, that is to make an honest assessment of the situation based on the facts as they really are, and a determination to

pursue justice – to give each person what is their due. Bravery divorced from the motive of preserving what is good simply deteriorates into tyranny; there is no virtue in risking life and limb in order to achieve something evil. It is not virtuous to risk one's life in carrying out a murder or a bank robbery, there is no fortitude there. One cannot have fortitude if one is not also prudent and just.

What if I am very frightened, does that mean that I lack fortitude? On the contrary, there is not much to praise in a person who takes risks but feels no fear. Fortitude means feeling fear, but not allowing that fear to govern my actions. If I make all my decisions on the basis of avoiding the things that frighten me, I have surrendered my freedom; I am ruled by fear. Fortitude means saying, I am afraid of the consequences of doing this, but I know that it is the right thing to do, so I will risk those fearful consequences; I will not let my fear force me into doing evil, or neglecting good. Once again, let us be clear that this is not removed from our everyday lives. This is not just a virtue of the martyrs, although from the days of Jesus, and before, right down to our own day, fortitude has found its highest expression in the martyr's determination not to give in to evil. Fortitude is needed by the employee who risks his job to blow the whistle on malpractice, or the school pupil who stands up to and reports a bully, or the person who refuses to condone the seemingly petty dishonesty of his friends, and so on and so on.

So does fortitude always require heroic action? Not so, sometimes it requires a kind of heroic inactivity, the ability to endure silently and patiently the taunts or the criticisms of others. There is a strong link between patience and fortitude. We tend to think of patience as a sort of resigned acceptance of the inevitable, a dreary inactivity for long periods of time at the bus stop, or listening to tinned music on the phone after pressing option three, or whatever. Patience is, however, capable of a rather more elevated meaning. Patience in its truest sense means persisting with serenity and cheerfulness in spite of what is going on around you. Patience insists on risking injury and disadvantage in pursuing what is good, but refuses to be forced into misery and confusion by this. Patience is rooted in integrity, in the sense of maintaining all that is most truly human undisturbed by outside influence.

One of the mottos of contemporary living is 'anything for a quiet life'. Fortitude resists this, and replaces it with 'anything for a good life'. It challenges comfortable living where my own convenience is the overriding principle, and in doing so it also challenges comfortable religion which is used as a prop to confirm all the things I want to do anyway, but ignored when it challenges me to take risks or make sacrifices. Fortitude is a challenging virtue, because it requires that I accept insecurity and risk to my comfort and wellbeing are a part of life. It is a virtue which we can only achieve by prayer, by determination, and by building up habitual ways of acting on the excellent principle put forward by C S Lewis that "Very often the only way to get a quality in reality is to start behaving as if you had it already" (Mere Christianity). If I want to grow in fortitude, I may have to act as if I am more brave than I feel. Fortitude takes me back to that incident in Mark's gospel, and to Jesus' response when Peter tries to divert him from the costly path of doing what is right: "Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do." (Mar 8.33)

Notes for an inclusion in response to press coverage of the Pope's visit to Africa

How much coverage have journalists given to the rest of the Pope's visit to Africa?

If the answer is virtually none, then one must conclude they are not really interested in Africa at all, simply in defending the export of Western lifestyles to African people.

Should Africans be impressed by advice from the UK? We have the highest teenage pregnancy rate in western Europe (Report by Population International, 2007) and ballooning rates of sexually transmitted infections (Health Protection Agency website gives annual details).

Was what the Pope said about AIDS and condoms correct? Yes, says Edward C. Green, director of the AIDS Prevention Research Project at the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies, who also said "We have found no consistent associations between condom use and lower HIV-infection rates, which, 25 years into the pandemic, we should be seeing if this intervention was working." (Interview with National Review Online, available via their website).

How have different strategies worked (or not worked) in different countries, eg Thailand/Philippines, Uganda/Botswana? Detailed statistics and references can be found on Fr Tim Finigan's parish website at <http://www.rosary.freeuk.com/aidslink.html>